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ABSTRACT

The fears and anxieties of students in second language learning situations often prevent successful performance in the language. Three techniques from Behavior Modification can be applied to overcome such anxieties and to further achievement in second language learning: (1) Systematic Desensitization; (2) Cognitive Restructuring; and (3) Modeling and Guided Participation. The goal of Systematic Desensitization is to give the person the opportunity to make a positive reaction in the face of the anxiety-causing situation and therefore experience a sense of achievement. Systematic exposure to the anxiety-causing situation without the occurence of anxiety is the decisive factor governing the elimination of the anxiety. The second technique is intended to promote awareness of the anxious person's verbal and non-verbal behavior and cognitively restructure unrealistic anticipation, e.g. anticipation of failure or peer derision. The basic principle of the third technique involves arranging the environment and supporting the person so that the occurrence of anxiety is reduced sufficiently to ensure a successful experience. (Author/CFM)

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MEANS TO OVERCOME THE ANXIETIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS*

Frequently students enter the second language learning classroom with fears and anxieties. Jakobovits and Gordon suggest to the teacher to hold small encounter group sessions with students to examine their attitudes as well as their learning styles of the second language.[1] From numerous small group sessions held with college students in first-year Spanish classes, I collected a list of their anxieties. In a recent Bilingual Training Institute I taught Spanish to a group of Elementary School Teachers who candidly admitted to their fears which they were bringing to the second language learning situation. The following anxiety-causing factors were identified by students:

1. Inability to learn another language,
2. Inability to pronounce strange sounds and words,
3. Not knowing the meaning of strange words and sentences,
4. Inability to understand and answer questions in the new language,
5. Language classes have a reputation for failure and bad grades,
6. Peer derision and criticism,
7. Not knowing or understanding the goals and requirements of the course,

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8. The teacher in general, native-speaker teachers especially,
9. Testing, especially the oral part,
10. Previous unsuccessful language learning attempts,
11. Encountering different cultural values and customs.

Probably many more anxieties can be defined and a full-scale anxiety inventory established. The students' anxieties, if unacknowledged and continued unchecked, prevent interaction in the learner group and hinder the acquisition of the second language. Chastain stresses the importance of a good self-concept for successful language learning.[2] The concept in psychology of Self-sulfilling Prophecy presupposes a positive mental set for learning achievement. Hidden and overt anxieties of second-language learners must be recognized and overcome or controlled.

Behavior Modification based on a social learning model provides us with several techniques applicable to overcome anxieties in second-language learning situations. O'Leary and Wilson make a strong point for a social learning basis of contemporary Behavior Modification in contrast to its historical roots in Behaviorism.[3] Previously, Behavior Modification was founded on narrow stimulus-response theories, but the social learning

model recognizes the role of cognitive mediational processes. While an earlier psychodynamic model regarded underlying psychic conflict as cause for anxieties, the current model looks at the same anxieties within the social context, e.g., how such anxieties developed, how they are being maintained, etc. In this model anxiety behavior is seen as the result of problems in daily life and as the result of social influence processes. Because anxieties are regarded as rooted in the social environment, the social learning model of Behavior Modification uses social processes like expectancy, persuasion, attitude change, and interpersonal attraction to modify or change a person's anxiety. Previously it was assumed that Behavior Modification methods cannot beneficially alter modes of psychological functioning and can only change overt behavior; with the method's new foundation in a social learning approach, however, not only are substantial behavioral changes occurring, but also favorable changes are reported in the person's affective and attitudinal responses in the face of anxiety-causing situations. Further, while a person is overcoming a certain anxiety, e.g., the anxiety concerning second-language learning, other anxieties are also improved, because the person obtains a sense of competence and learns a problem solving

skill. Therefore, as teachers in the second-language classroom, we have the opportunity not only to help the student modify anxieties rooted in the learning task, but also we can produce desirable affective changes. Thus, Behavior Modification techniques fit well into an overall humanistic approach to language teaching.

Behavior Modification recognizes that anxiety is a complex pattern of cognitive, physiological, and behavioral factors. Therefore a multifaceted approach is used with different techniques drawn from the framework of social learning theory. The following are techniques and some of their applications to the language classroom.

Systematic Desensitization has been used successfully with college students experiencing debilitating anxiety in public speaking,[4] therefore its applications to the second-language learning anxieties are obvious. Also, this technique has proven to be especially effective when conditioned anxiety is the problem, the case of students with prior failure in language learning. The goal of Systematic Desensitization is for the person to make a positive reaction or response in the face of the anxiety-causing situation or factor; e.g., for an anxious student to give a repetition or answer in the second language and therefore experience a sense of

achievement.

Two processes are employed in Systematic Desensitization. In the first process the person imagines a situation that would cause anxiety; such situations are carefully graded for difficulty. In the language classroom such situations are often used already: an imaginary dialog, scenes at the bus station or restaurant, telephone conversations, etc. Students can either simulate such situations by themselves with self-verbalizations or can act out together such situational language learning. This imaginary process can also include students talking to themselves in the new language or preparing answers to teacher-cued questions. The second process necessitates the person's participation in _in vivo_ situations. Now the anxious student, e.g., asks in the new language for needed information on the phone, asks for his food in an actual restaurant, exchanges courtesies with a native speaker just encountered. The non-imaginary situations have been shown very productive in Behavior Modification because the decisive factor governing the erasure of the anxiety is a systematic exposure to the anxiety-causing situation without the occurrence of anxiety. If communicative competence is the aim of the language learning, then anxious students must have exposure to _in vivo_ lan-

guage situations. The following activities are suggestions: radio, tv, and tapes in the language, native speakers as guests, telephone conversations and visits with native speakers, visits to places where the language is spoken. In the classroom the teacher needs to create an atmosphere of trust and understanding of the reasons why the teacher as the language model needs to use the new language as much as possible, again as a means of Systematic Densensitization for comprehension anxieties. Further, Affective Learning Activities as described by Christensen[5] as well as various language learning tasks based on human dynamics principles serve as excellent in vivo desensitization of anxieties.

Cognitive Restructuring, another technique of Behavior Modification, takes into account that most anxieties are due to the irrational way in which people often construe their world, i.e., that their self-verbalizations lead to self-defeating statements. The goal of this technique is to promote awareness of the anxious person's verbal and non-verbal behavior and cognitively restructure unrealistic anticipation, e.g., in the classroom the unfounded but defeating anticipations of failure, of inability to learn, of peer derision, etc. Cognitive Restructuring of anxieties follows four steps:

1. Explaining that unrealistic anxieties are the result of distressing things one tells oneself about the situation rather than being due to the situation itself.
2. Training the person to identify specific self-verbalizations which he emits in the anxiety-causing situation and of which he was unaware.
3. Convincing the person of the self-defeating and irrational nature of such self-verbalizations.
4. Modeling and reinforcing alternative, constructive verbalizations.

In the classroom Cognitive Restructuring can take the form of involving the students in discussions or arguments about their feelings and rationalizations concerning the language learning. Such talking can become the basis for honest exchanges and the creation of trust between students themselves and also between students and teachers. During several of the previously mentioned small encounter sessions, I discovered the students' anxieties about peer laughter and derision. This anxiety turned out to be the reason for many class absences as well as general unwillingness to respond. During several sessions, using the processes of Cognitive Restructuring, students realized that they had largely created this particular anxiety, that they all were afraid of each other,

that it was a rather comic situation, and they agreed that not one of them knew enough of the language to laugh about anybody else's performance. The students were honest enough to admit in subsequent sessions that it took a long time to overcome this fear of peer derision even after we had cognitively worked through and restructured this anxiety situation, i.e., assured every student that nobody would mock and laugh about his performance in the new language.

One final thought to the Cognitive Restructuring technique: O'Leary and Wilson see this facet of Behavior Modification as a different approach to the ancient "Know thyself," the words changing to "Know thy controlling variables and know how to change them."

The techniques of Modeling and Guided Participation are based upon the recognition that success of performance is the most effective means of modifying the associated anxieties. The goal consists of modeling a successful performance for the person and subsequently guiding him into his own successful performance of feared activities in vivo. Two steps are involved:

1. Initially the activities of the performance are modeled.
2. The person is encouraged and physically assisted in jointly performing with the model carefully graded

subtasks of increasing difficulty.

The basic principle of this technique involves arranging the environment and supporting the person so that the occurrence of anxiety is reduced sufficiently to ensure a successful experience. As the person keeps performing successfully, the model or guide gradually withdraws aid until the person can perform without anxiety in the task or behavior. Research and studies of the Modeling and Guided Participation techniques show that not only substantial behavioral changes occurred, but also a better self-concept was produced as a result of affective and attitudinal changes in other areas. Further, a sense of competence and a new problem-solving skill were identified as results.

These Behavior Modification techniques can be particularly helpful in retraining Elementary School Teachers for Elementary Bilingual Education Programs. The most urgently needed skill is a second language, usually Spanish. The language learning situation has the great advantage of being able to use many in vivo situations in the bilingual community and native speakers are available to serve as models and guides in task performance.

The student's preparation to conduct a parent-teacher conference shall serve as an example for the applica-

tion of the Modeling and Guided Participation technique. Parent-teacher contacts are of vital importance for a successful Bilingual Education Program. Such contacts are also the source of many anxieties for non-native speakers. Therefore the successful performance of a parent-teacher conference is a critical part of the training program. As a first step, such a conference is modeled by a native-speaker parent, willing to help, and a teacher already trained in the language skill. Then such a conference is modeled again in its essential segments, e.g., how to greet the parents, what courtesy questions are asked, what gestures are used, what customs are observed. Naturally, much cultural information is needed by the student in addition to the language skills. Then the segment of the actual conference about the student's achievements, failures, problems, etc., is modeled. Several versions of this part should be presented. After the modeling sessions, students will work out adequate language materials. The second and major step is to be involved in an actual situation of greeting parents with the assistance and guidance of a teacher proficient in the language. This teacher will play the lead role, so to speak: greeting the parents first, giving the trainee a chance to repeat, asking questions about a certain member of the family,

letting the trainee ask questions about the student's siblings, etc. The trainee will ask parents to sit down and then, at the first conference, probably merely listen and only participate again in the farewell courtesies. On subsequent occasions the trainee takes over more and more of the actual discussion while the experienced teacher will serve as a standby until the trainee has overcome his anxieties by means of various successful performances in parent-teacher conferences, until the trainee knows that he can understand the parent's questions and that, in turn, they understand his own questions and explanations.

The Modeling and Guided Participation techniques also serve to lead the trainee to successful interaction with his students, using a trained teacher again as a lead, then a standby person until the trainee has overcome the anxieties of being able to interact successfully with his class in the new language. Further, the same methods will lead to successful performance during telephone conversations, notoriously difficult to master since the clues of the facial expressions and/or gestures of the other person are unavailable. Applications of these techniques are also possible to the average classroom for greetings, introductions, and short conversations, if native speakers

or good advanced students can serve as partners. A further application exists for the student-teaching situation, especially in advanced language classes which frequently create performance anxieties for the beginning student teacher. Such fears can be solved by a team-teaching approach in which the student teacher is carefully guided to assume more or all of the instructions.

In summary, student anxieties often prevent successful second-language learning. Various techniques as employed by the social learning model of Behavior Modification can be applied to modify or overcome such anxieties. Once the goals and processes of such techniques have been understood, a language teacher's creative thinking will find endless applications to affect higher student achievement.

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*This article was presented as a paper at the 1976 Annual ACTFL Conference at New Orleans.

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